Ross the Fig BOSS
Oct 8, 20208 min read

What to do with Young Potted Fig Trees come Winter

Updated: Mar 21, 2023

Every fall there are a lot of questions I receive regarding winterizing fig trees. Specifically, is it too late to plant them now that it's the fall season and should I buy young fig trees if we're so close to winter? How do I protect my young fig trees come winter?

For those unfamiliar with my work, I'm Ross Raddi a commercial fig grower in the Philadelphia area. At any given time I have over 100 fig trees planted in the ground and 200 fig trees in containers here in zone 7A.

I've made every mistake in the book to try and push the limits about winterization so that you can benefit from this information. Let's get started:

As always, feel free to subscribe to the Fig Boss monthly newsletter for more fig-related content like this.

- **Key Takeaways:**

Can a Young Fig Tree Survive the Winter?

Fig tree hardiness largely depends on the variety and its ability to withstand extreme winter temperatures. The genetic makeup of a fig tree determines its hardiness, similar to how genetics determines the height of an NBA center. Thus, selecting the right fig variety is crucial for successful cultivation in colder growing zones.

Most fig varieties can reliably survive temperatures as low as 10°F. Fewer varieties can withstand 5°F, and only a handful can tolerate 0°F. Generally, the low end of the USDA hardiness zones for fig trees is 6A (with winter protection), 7A (without winter protection, but it’s still recommended), and 7B.

Chicago Hardy is a well-known fig variety known for its cold hardiness, often considered the standard for hardiness. However, some lesser-known fig varieties might extend the range of suitable growing conditions for fig trees and others compare to Hardy Chicago's hardiness.

To see a full list of cold-tolerant fig varieties, check out this detailed article, here:

Apart from the fig variety, it is essential to ensure that your fig tree has well-lignified branches for cold tolerance. Even the hardiest figs, like Hardy Chicago, can suffer damage if branches are not well-lignified. In some cases, fig trees in warmer climates like Louisiana or Florida experience winter damage at temperatures in the low 20s, while those in Northern climates may not see any damage despite winter lows of 0°F.

The key lies in the growth pattern of the fig trees. In warmer climates, excess water in the soil during the summer and fall that is commonly found in the Southern US encourages continuous growth during the end of the growing season. Ideally, you need 3 or more months before the first hard frost for your fig tree to properly lignify.

However, young fig trees are rarely lignified properly. They tend to suck up lots of water when they're young and are even more sensitive for this reason. Regardless of the fig variety, young trees should be kept above 15-25F at all times depending on their level of lignification. Therefore, it's crucial to protect young fig trees from severe winter weather.

The way I see it, you have 3 options for overwintering and protecting young potted fig trees:

Option 1: Planting or "Heeling" Your Fig Trees in the Ground

- **Plant fig trees in the ground during the fall for a permanent home or just heel them in to eventually dig them up come springtime. Fall is one of the best times for planting fig trees, even in short-season climates.**
- **If you're going to plant or heel your fig tree in the ground, it is critical to protect your young fig trees in cold climates (when temperatures drop below 15-25F) from winter damage by wrapping, covering, or creating a ring of chicken wire around the tree and filling it in with mulch like leaves or woodchips.**
- **When planting, a few bottom nodes of the trunk should be below the soil level to guarantee those buds survive and the tree can recover should your protection methods fail.**
- **Another pro-tip is to cover the soil with a woodchip layer to insulate the roots during winter. Just like the branches, the roots also have a hardiness rating.**
- **I like fall planting because there is potential for a more vigorous start to the following season. Fig trees can continue to establish their roots at soil temperatures of only 50F.**

Site Selection for Fig Trees:

Ensure at least 6 hours of direct sunlight daily, well-draining soil, and proximity to heat sources to promote healthy growth and high yields.

Consider size and spacing: Plant fig trees with proper spacing based on their intended width and size, which can range from 6-12 feet with pruning and training, up to 40-75 feet without.

Fig trees have shallow, fibrous root systems well-suited for containers or poor soils, and are less likely to cause damage to underground utilities or foundations.

For more on planting fig trees, see this detailed article:

Option 2: Bring your tree inside for the winter

This is the most common option and quite frankly why I wrote this article. Bringing them inside is the most common rookie mistake leading to setbacks or death the following growing season.

However, if you have no choice, indoor fig trees need heavy-duty supplemental lighting and warm soil temperatures (above 70F) for optimal growth. A sunny window is insufficient for indoor fig tree growth during winter, and be cautious of overwatering indoor fig trees, as they are prone to root rot and could die. Dormant fig trees that are not actively growing need far less soil moisture than those that have warm soil and plenty of leaves.

Don't forget to monitor indoor fig trees for pest pressure, such as spider mites and scale, to prevent severe damage or death.

What fig trees normally look like after a hard frost. A sign that your tree is now entering dormancy:

Option 3: Allowing Potted Trees to Go Dormant

Out of the 3 options, it is best to encourage your young potted fig trees to go dormant by exposing them to 1-2 light frosts. This is the safest and easiest option of the 3.

Store your dormant fig trees in a location with temperatures between 20-50F, such as a root cellar, garage, shed, or insulated outdoor structure. Avoid unheated basements as these are usually too warm and your tree will prematurely wake up well before your last frost date.

During the process of exposing them to light frosts, bring them inside when the forecast is predicting 20-24F, as those temperatures can damage young fig trees, especially those that are not well-lignified. If you're concerned about lignification, place the tree in a sunny indoor spot for 4-6 weeks to lignify before exposing it to outdoor frosts.

By bringing your fig tree into storage prior to total defoliation from a number of light frosts, your tree will likely not truly go dormant. Dormancy for fig trees provides significant biological benefits that you don't want to miss. It's like forgetting to sleep at night for 6 months. Your tree will be fairly groggy at the beginning of the next growing season.

Not only that, but your fig tree may prematurely "wake up" well before your last frost date. Often in darkness and with few options for proper storage. Once your fig trees are awake and growing, they require sufficient sunlight. Otherwise, your fig season may yet again face another season-altering setback.

Pruning Fig Trees: Timing Matters for Hardiness

Pruning fig trees before winterization can decrease their hardiness, making them more susceptible to cold temperatures and potential damage. It is wise to postpone pruning your fig trees that are planted in the ground until spring to ensure the tree's overall health and vigor.

When pruning is carried out before dormancy, the tree may redirect its energy and resources toward new growth instead of focusing on lignification for the colder months. This new growth is more vulnerable to frost and cold injury, putting the tree at greater risk of damage during winter.

I also theorize that the wounds from pruning cuts can create a weak spot for winter damage and overall lower the tree's natural hardiness. Regardless of whether or not this is true, I've seen better results across the board when I leave my fig trees that are planted in the ground unpruned until the spring.

For more on winter protection of not just young trees, but also older in-ground or potted trees, watch this informative video:

F.A.Q.

Q: When should I bring my potted fig tree inside for the winter?

A: If you plan to bring your potted fig tree inside for the winter, wait until it has experienced 1-2 light frosts, signaling that it's entering dormancy. You should see total defoliation and minimal or no sap flow after pruning.

In general, keep potted fig trees away from temperatures below 15F and young potted fig trees above 15-25F depending on their level of lignification.

Q: Can you leave a potted fig outside in winter?

A: Yes, you can leave a potted fig tree outside in winter if it's properly protected and the temperature stays above 15F. Choose a sheltered location against a structure away from the wind, group your potted fig trees together, and cover them like you would a fig tree that's planted in the ground.

Often growers lay them on their sides and mulch them heavily with a tarp over the top of them or they'll create a wooden frame around them and fill the frame with insulative mulching materials.

Q: How do you wrap a young fig tree for the winter?

A: To wrap a young fig tree for winter protection, follow these steps:

1. **Do any necessary pruning to change the shape, and size and remove any dead, damaged, or crisscrossing branches.**
2. **Tie the remaining branches together.**
3. **Wrap the tree with burlap or blankets, starting from the bottom and working your way up, overlapping the layers.**
4. **Secure the wrapping with twine or rope.**
5. **Add an additional layer of protection by wrapping the tree with a tarp or concrete blanket, and sealing it so that it's airtight. Top the wrapping with a trash can or a large pot.**
6. **Cover the base of the wrapping with woodchips**

For a more detailed guide on wrapping fig trees, check out this article:

Q: How do you care for a potted fig tree indoors?

A: When caring for a potted fig tree indoors during winter, ensure it receives heavy-duty supplemental lighting and maintains soil temperatures above 70°F. Water the tree sparingly to prevent root rot, and monitor for pests like spider mites and scale.

Indoor fig trees are still heavy feeders, so feed them more than you would feed most houseplants.

Q: Should I fertilize my young fig tree in winter?

A: Yes, fertilize your fig tree in the winter. After a long slumber, fig trees like a bear after hibernation need something to eat. Fertilization before putting them away into winter storage ensures that they have some food when they wake up.

In the early spring resume fertilizing, when the tree begins to show signs of growth.

For more on caring for young fig trees, watch this informative video: